DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 120 802 CS 202 662

AUTHOR Wagner, Eileen Nause
TITLE When the Bookkeeping System Takes Over: The Effects of Grading Compositions on Student Attitudes.
PUB DATE 76
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (27th, Philadelphia, March 25-27, 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS *Composition (Literary); Credit No Credit Grading; Educational Research; *Evaluation Methods; Feedback; *Grading; Higher Education; Motivation; *Pass Fail Grading; Positive Reinforcement; *Student Attitudes; Teacher Behavior; Teaching Methods; Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

Communications to college students about the value of their composition are better expressed in words than in letter grades. Research by Sweet and Seidman suggests that free-style, positive comment on student papers produces a markedly improved attitude toward writing. The author's own research reveals that in the presence of positive, free comment, the addition or deletion of a letter grade does not significantly alter attitude improvement as measured by the Osgood Semantic Differential. While the grade itself does not appear to have a negative effect on students' desire to write, its implications for the teacher are more far-reaching. Letter grading consumes much of the instructor's time and therefore encourages the tendency to assign fewer papers. More importantly, letter grading directs the teacher's commentary to the negative aspects of student work, thus interfering with effective positive feedback. (KS)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

ED120802

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Eileen Nause Wagner, Ed.D.
Virginia Union University

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Eileen Nause Wagner

TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER.

WHEN THE BOOKKEEPING SYSTEM TAKES OVER:

The Effects of Grading Compositions on Student Attitudes *

Given a few moments serious thought, one cannot help wonder why the placing of a letter grade, or some equivalent, on student writing is necessary. The process of reducing human energy and ingenuity to five symbols can be little more than a vain attempt to regularize and codify a complex chaos of expression and set it down in the tiny spaces provided by gradebooks. What do the A's, and the F's, actually tell? They tell us, the teachers, the relative worth of a student's offerings. They tell them, the students, the relative worthlessness of their offerings or, in the case of the shining A, the worthlessness of continued striving for mastery. But one often hears the over-simplifying process of letter grading justified in its ability to carry a clear message to the paper's author. Just what is the message? Does letter grading say anything to the student about the intrinsic value of his work? I would suggest that such communications to the student are better expressed in words, at least, if not in sentences and paragraphs, rather than in crytic single letters, with or without arithmetic appendages.

---

*This paper was presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference of College Composition and Communication in Philadelphia on March 27, 1976.

CS202662

Or, does letter grading merely serve to "put the student author in his place" in relation to his peers and possibly even in relation to the great literary masters? Can the communication process, even in the now-eclipsed two dimensional medium of the written word, be judged in such terse shorthand as grading? I doubt that anyone ever meant for these pregnant and contradictory meanings to be associated with grading. The case of letter grading in composition instruction seems to be a case of the bookkeeping system taking over the business operation, dictating the range of possibilities and limitations rather than simply reflecting how the business is doing. The medium has its own message, unfortunately. Moreover, I am convinced the message conveyed by the practice of letter grading student compositions may be contrary to the very purposes for which we attempt to provide writing instruction.

During my career as an instructor of remedial writing at a community college, as a Freshman English instructor in an urban state university and now as a writing teacher in a predominantly black private college, I have posed these doubts about the grading of compositions to innumerable colleagues in smoky teachers' lounges. I have been so often greeted with the indifferent "So what? What harm does grading do?", that I decided to look into it, a resolution which conveniently coincided with the final phase of my graduate work. As I dug through the previous work on composition evaluation, I was struck by two things. First, I was neither alone nor the pioneer in my overt suspicion of this practice. William Dusel raised the issue of grading's effect on student attitudes in an English Journal article circa 1955. Dusel suggested that no teacher should place a grade on a student paper unless

he meant to hurt that student's self image. Second and very puzzling, I encountered researchers, who, like many of my colleagues, seemed to accept the necessity of the grade as a constant which could not possibly alter the outcome of their research. This last observation seemed to be part of the resistance to reform in composition grading. "Since the practice has always been used---Who can remember when it was not?---it does not bear examination." It did bear examination and it still does, which is why I am recounting the rationale and result of my work to you, so that you might be inclined to look further into the practice.

The central question of my research turned out to be two-pronged. It started with "What impact does composition grading have on the student's ability to write?" This is the classical question. The general results of studies which have tackled the effect of any method on writing performance, as I am sure you know, have been classically inconclusive. But in the pursuit of the elusive "significant difference" between experimental and control groups, another, far more interesting, question has emerged. "What is the impact of composition grading on the student's attitude toward himself as a writer and toward his own writing?"

Studies conducted by several researchers but most notably, Roger Sweet and Earl Seidman, developed the line of thinking which goes something like this: We cannot seem to get at experimental changes in actual writing performance. But recent advances in attitude testing have made it possible to measure a subject's propensity to change his writing performance. Perhaps, the effects of experimental methods may show up in attitude before they appear in performance measures. Sweet, in a masters' thesis, set up a classic experimental design. He exposed three groups to different composition

evaluations. One group received no comment at all on their papers. Another group received only canned comments, that is, from a list of predetermined phrases, while the third group received free comments. Sweet gave all a pre-test and post-test of their evaluative attitude toward writing using the Osgood Semantic Differential Scale. A conclusion of "significant difference" between the experimental groups did not elude Sweet; he found that free style commenting is better than rigidly standardized commenting and that some comment is better than none. Earl Seidman examined the effects of positive comment, negative comment and no comment on student attitudes toward writing. Seidman used an observed behavior rather than a pencil and paper test to measure change in attitude. Seidman concluded that positive comment was better than both negative or no commenting. Now, I'm sure you're wondering why I am telling you about experiments dealing with commenting when my special interest is grading; the two practices are not synonymous. These two studies indicated to me that linking an evaluation technique (in my case, grading) with measures of attitude change was a viable line of investigation. Incidently, while both Sweet and Seidman arrived at conclusions concerning attitude toward writing, when they attempted to link their treatments to change in writing performance, they were confronted with the same disappointment experienced by dozens of other researchers in composition methodology.

My strategy was to take the best elements from these studies and construct an experiment to measure the effect of the letter grade alone on student attitudes toward composition. These two studies suggested the constants for the experiment I had in mind: Some comment is clearly better

than none; free comment is better than canned comment, and positive comment is better than negative comment. From this, I decided that my experimental groups should have their compositions evaluated using positive, free commenting. One group would also receive a letter grade on each paper. The other group would receive only the comments and no letter grade. Since Seidman ran into problems with his use of an observed behavior to measure change in attitude, I decided to use the same pencil and paper test, the Osgood Semantic Differential, as did Sweet.

Included in the study were eight variables designed to take out potential error in the experiment. An elaborate system of "back-up" tests was used to insure that the results were not contaminated by various elements inherent in the sample. The resulting statistics are far too complex to recount here. But the conclusion is rather simple by comparison with the means by which it was generated. I found this: In the presence of positive free comment, it DID NOT MATTER whether you put the grade on the student's paper or not! While the changes in attitude were greater in the group that did not receive the grade, these changes were not significantly greater than the changes of the group that did receive the grade. In deference to tradition, I performed a similar test using changes in writing performance as the criterion variable. The results were the same: Slightly higher scores among the non-graded group but not enough to be called significantly different from the graded group.

But, you say, why all the excitement? This is just another in the long list of experiments in composition teaching which have turned out inconclusive. Not at all. The experiment was designed to see if the absence of a grade made any positive difference, which Dusel, for example, might suggest it should.

But the experiment was also designed to see if the presence of the grade made any positive difference, as suggested by advocates and practitioners of composition grading. While the grade does not appear to have an insidious negative effect on a student's desire to write, neither is the grade any powerful instructional tool without which the teaching process would collapse. The conclusion that the letter grade tells the student author something which will show up either in his attitude toward writing or in his actual writing performance, is simply unfounded. The grade itself does not seem to communicate anything of importance to the student.

But, how, in the light of these results, can I still hold my conviction that grading may be working against the very purposes for which we provide writing instruction? The results of my study are inescapable: The practice of grading does not seem to have any real effect on the student. But, what about the effect of the practice of grading on the teacher? We need only ask what do most composition teachers think about the grading process. Squire and Applebee (1968) found that most English teachers think of composition instruction and "grading" papers as one and the same thing. Albert Kitzhaber (1963) has written that the process of evaluating a student's paper is largely a demonstration by the teacher that he can find every little mistake that might be hiding out in the text; a missed error would be a slur on the teacher's professional competence. In short, the grading process is a process of justification. If a grade is placed on the student's paper, it must be justified. Unfortunately, justification is more a matter of "taking away points" rather than singling out the positive features that have "added up to" the grade. This natural need to justify the grade given a paper in the accompanying comments has two clearly bad effects. First of all, it is time consuming and unpleasant for the teacher to comb through papers hunting down

the undesirable elements. Dusel reported English teachers believed that if they marked student compositions thoroughly, they would have time for little else (1956). There is a temptation, in addition, for these teachers to assign fewer papers because of the unpleasantness of the inevitable grading process. Anyone who ascribes to the theory that growth and mastery in a skill must be accompanied by much practice will see the danger inherent in the grading process.

The second bad effect has a far more serious consequence than eye-sore, overworked writing teachers. If the process of justification means that the teacher must point out the paper's weaknesses which accounted for a less-than-A+ grade, the comments must be characterized as negative. If we have learned nothing else from Earl Seidman and a host of others who have examined the question of negative verses positive commenting in composition instruction, we must conclude that any practice which leads to the use of negative commenting must be contrary to the goal of optimum effectiveness in composition instruction.

Of course, even if one accepts my assertion that the use of grades to evaluate compositions is undesirable, there remains the problem of functioning within the system. Schools use grades to measure and report progress and performance. Courses in composition are rarely exempt from this system; although such an exemption from the reporting of grades for writing courses might be the best and most direct way of dealing with this dilemma. I am not so naive to think this might become a widely accepted occurrence especially in the light of recent research giving Pass/Fail and other non-grading techniques a generally bad name. Working always within systems which have held tenaciously to the letter grade, I developed a system of alternatives to grading compositions which range from moderate variations of the traditional

process to the extreme solution of having students evaluate themselves. I described these alternatives in detail in an article which appeared March, 1975 in English Journal. I would suggest that any teacher committed as I am to evaluation of student writing minus the letter grade can find dozens of creative ways, ranging from contract grading to peer grading, in order to arrive at the final course grade while avoiding the odious need to affix that letter to every paper the student shows the teacher.

Since this paper has been, for the most part, a report of experimental research, it would only be fitting to conclude with a traditional call for further research into the question of the effects of composition evaluation. My own research raised as many questions about a variety of composition related topics as it answered. Those of us who are at the front line of composition teaching have an obligation, I think, to not only reflect on our professional goals and practices but to actively attempt to evaluate both and the relationship between them.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: RESEARCH ON COMPOSITION EVALUATION

Braddock, Richard, Richard Lloyd-Jones and Lowell Schoer. Research in Written Composition. Champaign, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1963.

Buxton, Earl. An Experiment to Test the Effects of Writing Frequency and Guided Practice upon Students' Skill in Written Composition. Unpublished Dissertation, Stanford University, 1958.

Dawes, Robyn M. Fundamentals of Attitude Measurement. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1972.

Dusel, William. "How Should Student Writing Be Judged?" in English Journal, (1957) XLVI, 263-268.

_____. "Some Semantic Implications of Theme Correction" in English Journal, (1955) XLIV, 390-397.

_____. Professional Responsibilities of English Teachers and Conditions Of Instruction in California Secondary Schools. Unpublished Dissertation, Stanford University, 1956.

Edwards, Allen L. Techniques of Attitude Scale Construction. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1957.

Effros, Charlotte. An Experimental Study of Effectiveness of Guided Revision and Delayed Grades on Writing Proficiency of College Freshmen. Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Education (DHEW), 1973. ED 079 764

Eulert, Don. "The Relationship of Personality Factors to Learning in College Composition" in College Composition and Communication, (1967) XVIII, 62-66.

Gee, Thomas. Effects of Written Comment on Expository Composition. Unpublished Dissertation, North Texas State University, 1970.

Herriott, M. E. "Attitudes as Factors of School Success" in University of Illinois Bulletin, (1929) XXVIII, 2.

Jenkins, James, Wallace A Russell and George Suci. "An Atlas of Semantic Profiles for 360 Words" in the American Journal of Psychology, (1958), LXXI, 688-699.

Kelly, M. E. Effects of Two Types of Teacher Response to Essays upon Twelfth Grade Students' Growth in Writing Proficiency. Unpublished Dissertation, Michigan State University, 1973. Abstract: ED 091 686//

Kitzhaber, Albert. Themes, Theories, and Therapy. New York: McGraw-Hill Publishing Company, 1963.

Krathwohl, David R., Benjamin Bloom and Bertram Masia. Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, Handbook II: Affective Domain. New York: David McKay Co., 1964.

Mahaffie, Shamus. Composition Evaluation: Historical Background and Applied Theory. Unpublished Dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 1971.

Meckel, Henry C. "Research in Teaching Composition and Literature" in the Handbook of Research in Teaching, edited by N. L. Gage. Chicago: Rand-McNally, 1963.

Oppenheim, Abraham N. Questionnaire Design and Attitude Measurement. New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1966.

Osgood, Charles E., George J. Suci and Percy H. Tannenbaum. The Measurement of Meaning. Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1967.

Page, Ellis. "Teacher Comment and Student Performance: A Seventy-four Classroom Experiment in School Motivation" in Journal of Educational Psychology, (1958) XLIX, 173-181.

Putz, Joan. The Effectiveness of Non-Directive Teaching as a Method of Improving Writing Ability. Unpublished Dissertation, New York University, 1969. Abstract: ED 049 223

Sears, Mary Olive. Effects of Student-Centered Procedure on Self-Concept and Writing Practice of College Freshmen. Unpublished Dissertation, Florida State University, 1970. Abstract: ED 056 024

Seidman, Earl. Marking Student Compositions: Implications of Achievement Motivation. Unpublished Dissertation, Stanford University, 1967.

Squire, James and Roger K. Applebee. High School English Instruction Today. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1968.

Snider, James G. and Charles E. Osgood. Semantic Differential Technique: A Source Book. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969.

Sweet, Roger. Educational Attainment and Attitude Toward Writing as a Function of Feedback in the Form of Teachers' Written Comment. Unpublished Thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1966. ED 015 163

Thompson, Ralph. Implications of Recent Attitude Research for Achievement of Certain Attitudinal Objectives in Secondary School English. Unpublished Dissertation, University of Illinois, 1959.

Wagner, Eileen N. "How to Avoid Grading Compositions" in English Journal, (1975) LXIV, 76-79.

_____. The Impact of Composition Grading on the Attitudes and Writing Performance of Freshman English Students. Unpublished Dissertation, University of Virginia, 1975.

Woodward, John C. Profile of the Poor Writer - The Relationship of Selected Characteristics to Poor Writing in College. Coral Gables, Florida: Miami University, 1965. ED 018 445